GOD, THE GIVER OF VICTORY AND PEACE.

A THANKSGIVING SERMON,

DELIVERED IN THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, SEPTEMBER 18, 1862,

RALEIGH, N. C.

By REV. JOSEPH M. ATKINSON.

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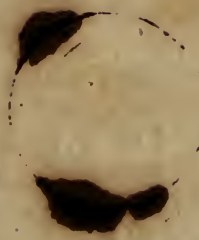

CORRESPONDENCE.

RALEIGH, Sept. 23rd, 1862.

REV. AND DEAR SIR:

It is desired by a large portion of your audience, who heard your very able, eloquent and instructive sermon on the late "Thanksgiving day," Sept. 18th—that the discourse should be printed in pamphlet form. We think that the very original and forcible manner in which you presented the issue involved in our present struggle, would not only prove instructive to the reading public generally, but that, if sent to our soldiers in camp, *as a tract*, it would prove very acceptable to them, and would tend to keep constantly before their minds the great truth—*that to God alone belongs the glory!* 'Tis HE, who in fact fights our battles; and to HIM should our thanks and praises be ascribed. You will confer a favor on us, and very many others of those who heard you, if you will furnish us with a copy of your discourse, on the occasion alluded to.

Most respectfully,

L. E. HEARTT,
H. A. BADHAM,
WM. PEACE,
T. McGEE,
H. D. TURNER,
R. E. MADDOX.
R. H. BATTLE,
C. DEWEY,
J. BROWN,
K. RAYNER,
F. L. ROBERTS,

RALEIGH, Oct. 1st, 1862.

Messrs. L. E. Heartt, H. A. Badham, William Peace and others.

GENTLEMEN:

The discourse which you have thought proper to ask for, was originally prepared without the remotest thought of publication.

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But since in your judgement, its more extensive circulation might be of service at this time, and especially to our soldiers, I do not feel at liberty to withhold it.

Accept my thanks for the very kind terms in which the request was conveyed, and believe me to remain,

With high regard,

Your friend and brother.

JOSEPH M. ATKINSON.

GOD, THE GIVER OF VICTORY AND PEACE.

Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning. Psalm 30 ; 5 : latter clause.

What a perfect picture of the providence of God and the experience of man! Alternation of good and evil, pain and pleasure, light and darkness, joy and weeping is the law of this lower world. In heaven where "transport and security combine," all is fixed, stable, everlasting; the experience of good is absolute, unmingled, unbounded. There shall be no succession, save of ever-growing felicities; no change, save of a continual rise from glory to glory.

> On all those wide extended plains,
> Shines one eternal day;
> There God the Son forever reigns,
> And scatters night away.

On earth, whether our state be one of joy or sorrow, we need to be reminded of this glorious prospect—in the one case to sober, in the other to cheer us. The mind takes the colour of the passing time, and thinks it will ever be as now it is, and fancies it will always feel as now it feels. But we should know from the varied dispensations of God in the past, from what others and ourselves have undergone, and from the repeated testimonies of the inspired Word, how false this estimate of things!

This is signally illustrated in the recent history of our country. God had good reason to send sorrow; but when sorrow has done its appointed work—when, by the sadness of the countenance the heart has been made better, we may expect the darkened cloud to withdraw and a glorious burst of sunlight to appear, like that which even now

> "Flames in the forehead of the morning sky,"

flashes its gladdening rays from east to west, and calls our whole Confederacy to thanksgiving and praise.

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It is in happiest accordance with the spontaneous impulse of a Christian people that the honored Chief Magistrate of these States, banded in a common brotherhood of love, of interest, of suffering and of mercies, has called us to grateful ascription and religious rejoicing.

On a memorable occasion, in the personal history of our Lord, * when the envious Pharisees rebuked the jubilant rejoicings of the disciples, He said, if these should hold their peace, the stones would immediately cry out. We might well look for a stern and audible rebuke from brute insensate things, if we should withhold our thankful tribute on this day to the God of our salvation. The Lord hath done great things for us, whereof we are glad. Bless the Lord, O, our souls, and forget not all His benefits.

At no distant day in the past, a dark cloud of uncertainty, of disaster, of wrath, overhung our whole Confederacy and discharged its collected fury on our devoted land. A series of unexpected and appalling reverses, beginning with the ill-fated battle of Somerset, followed in rapid succession by the capture of Roanoke Island, the loss of Newbern, Nashville, and of various intermediate points, and culminating in the surrender of New Orleans, the commercial emporium of the South, the evacuation of Norfolk and the blowing up of the Merrimac, had caused all faces to gather blackness. Then the boldest was filled with apprehension. The most sanguine were tempted to despair. The head of every patriot was bowed in profoundest grief. Shall we not be permitted to hope that the heart of every Christian was bowed in humility, confession and supplication? We felt that vain was the help of man, and we cast ourselves on the fatherhood of God. When brought to the lowest point of public depression and of conscious dependence, our deliverance was at hand. God poured the spirit of dauntless heroism into the hearts of a whole people—soldiers, legislators, leaders, alike. The generous resolution was taken to defend the Capitol of the Confederacy to the last extremity. From that moment our prospects began to brighten. Then came the successful repulse of the enemy at Drury's Bluff, flushed with anticipated triumph and glorying in imagined invincibility. Again our coveted and hated capital was beleaguered by the

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* Luke 19: 40.

most numerous and best appointed army of modern times, led by their most trusted and skillful generals. But day after day that mighty host was baffled and beaten back, like the surges of the sea raging against Gibraltar. Their strongest entrenchments were stormed. Their most costly munitions were captured or destroyed by the valor of our troops, animated, sustained and guided by the Lord of Hosts. The defence of Richmond was a prodigy, not only of human heroism but of Divine might. From that day to this, our march has been an unbroken series of splendid successes, under the invisible presence of the pillar and the cloud. Shall we not henceforward ascribe all glory to the Lord of Hosts, while mindful of our inextinguishable debt of gratitude to those noble patriots and martyrs whom He employed for our defence?

When the eyes of the prophet's servant were opened, he beheld the mountain filled with chariots of fire and horses of fire. In the first great battle of Cortes against the Mexicans the enthusiastic invaders imagined that they saw St. James, the patron St. of Spain, leading their fiery forces on to victory.* If our eyes could have been unsealed during those seven day's memorable battles before Richmond, we should doubtless have seen a more awful and a more glorious spectacle. We should have seen an angel, terrible as that which smote the host of Sennacherib, hurling back the multitudinous cohorts of our self confident invaders, filling their ranks with confusion, dismay and death. Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning.

Never in the history of mankind has the wonder-working providence of God been more strikingly manifest than in the successive phases of this contest. We wholly misapprehend the real significance of this revolution if we fail to discern His hand and His counsel in all that has been done, or, with high providence, permitted to be done. For the present, not joyful but grievous, it has doubtless been a divine agency for the spiritual education of our people in the highest lesson of religious wisdom, akin to that painful economy by which Jehovah led his ancient people through the perils of the pathless wilderness to the possession of the promised land. In the

* The same inspiring but imaginary vision, only in a form still more glorious, was again vouchsafed during the expulsion from Mexico.—Prescott's Conquest of Mexico, vol. ii. p. 341.

successive periods and phases of its progress, it has disappointed all probable anticipations; putting to shame the confident predictions of the wise and vindicating the superior sagacity of humble piety. Its principal agents were themselves even unconscious, before-hand, of the important part which they were designed to bear in the execution of the decrees of infinite wisdom. So far as it may be permitted to man to interpet it, the great purpose of God would appear to have been to exalt his own glorious sovereignty in debasing the pride of material power and illustrating the supremacy of moral forces. In this point of view, its progress has been to us singularly instructive and cheering. Not only does it stand aloof from all vulgar revolutions, but from that which we have been taught to regard with almost superstitious veneration as the most wonderful and noble in the annals of our race; that by which, under the divine favor, we achieved our independence of the British crown and became the freest and most powerful people in the New World. The course of Providential development in our first Revolution was essentially unlike what we have thus far witnessed in this. Compared with the former, the hand of God is more bare, more open, more visible, in that which is now in process of consummation. The personal history of one man is the record of that revolution. The portion of the life of Washington comprehended within the period, contains and exhausts the Revolution itself. He was not only the type and hero of the Revolution, but what was silently transacted in his thoughtful mind and conceived in his patriotic heart, and executed by his own individual prowess, constituted the sum of the Revolution. Thus far at least there is no one man of whom this can be said. There is no one man to whom the glory of these splendid achievements can be so eminently ascribed. It is this circumstance which especially distinguishes it from our first Revolution. In consequence of his undisputed ascendancy Washington received among us, it is to be feared the glory which is due to God only, and other eminent patriots and statesmen of that day, Henry, Hamilton, Jefferson, Madison and Marshall, were unduly exalted and relied on. The illustrous men of that generation constitute a grand Pantheon, each having his own proper altar and his own particular worshippers. It should indeed be to us a matter of grateful acknowledgement that God has raised up for us in this our time of need, able and

godly leaders, like Lee, Jackson, Hill and others, whose character would confer honor on any cause, as their public services would shed lustre on any age. But, perhaps, it is well for us that there is no one name with which the transcendent glory of this period of our country's history is too exclusively connected. Thus the apparent sphere of the Divine operation is enlarged, and our dependence on His favor, though not more immediate and absolute, is more conscious and visible.

In perfect consistency with this view, it may be affirmed as a uniform method of Divine Providence, springing, perhaps, from profound causes hidden in the nature of things and in the nature of man, that in all great Revolutionary movements, religious or political, the tendencies of the times should embody themselves in some one heroic individual whom all men are content to take as the type and representative of the whole period. Thus Luther stands forth confessed as the representative of the German reformation, Calvin of the reformation in France, Zwingle of the Swiss, and Knox of the Scottish reformation. Passing now to the domain of civil Revolution, we recognise at once Napoleon, with his brilliant endowments, his indefatigable power of bodily endurance, his inexhaustible fertility of resource, his insatiable thirst of military glory and supreme indifference to human life as the incarnate genius of the great Revolution in France, near the close of the last and the opening of the present century. At the mention of the American Revolution every eye turns at once to the majestic image of Washington, with his unsullied patriotism, his consummate prudence, his immeasurable self-control, as the model of all natural and all civil virtues. When we come to our own day, may we not hope that Jackson, the Christian hero, the man of piety and prayer, with a fervency of spirit, like David's in the sanctuary, and a martial ardour like David's in the field, has been graciously given us as the interpreter and impersonation of the Christian element and the Christian consciousness of this grand conflict?

We cannot but regard it as a singular mercy of God, that the men for the most part who are the chief agents of Providence in conducting this Revolution, should be in personal piety, in such perfect correspondence with its religious character; and that the recognition of God in his incommunicable glory as Supreme Disposer of all

events, should be so universal among our Rulers and people. So long as we shall deeply feel our dependence on God alone, and put our trust in Him, He will favor us, and our progress will be irresistible as the march of time. Faith is the principle of endeavor and endurance. It prompts energy and produces patience. In its relation to God, it waits and is dependent. They that believe shall not make haste. It says to the subject soul, stand still and see the salvation of God. In its relation to man, it is daring and defiant; seemingly desperate, imprudent, wild and reckless. But when apparently most adventurous, it is in fact most guarded and most prudent; for it is animated by a sublime enthusiasm which links the feebleness of the creature with the almightiness of God. The great virtue, therefore, which the crisis demands, and, we trust, has called forth, is faith in God—the perennial source of patience, courage and hope.

We are prone to rebel against the dispensations of the Most High and murmur as did Israel of old. But how is faith in the Divine Providence vindicated even in time! How often within the limited sphere of our own personal concerns, have we seen that our own plans would have been our ruin, and that the events which appeared most disastrous when they occurred, were blessings in disguise. It is the sovereign prerogative of God to bring good out of evil. Thus the awful catastrophe of our apostacy as a race is made the occasion of the eternal salvation of his elect, and of affording therein the most amazing illustration of His glorious attributes, to all intelligent creatures, throughout never-ending ages. And doubtless, each inferior but to us perhaps, scarcely less mysterious evil, as the rupture of what once seemed to us the golden chain that bound together in firm concord this bright sisterhood of States, and in place of amity and peace, gave us the alarms and atrocities of war, will yet find means even out of this visible chaos, to cause a brighter and a more beautiful creation to emerge.

In that magnificent plea of Milton for the liberty of unlicensed printing, the glorious image of his beloved country rises up before him in poetic vision, and he exclaims, "Methinks I see in my mind a noble and puissant nation, rousing herself like a strong man after sleep and shaking her invincible locks; Methinks, I see her as an eagle mewing her mighty youth and kindling her undazzled eyes at the

full midday beam; purging and unscaling her long abused sight at the fountain itself of heavenly radiance." This picture and prophecy we would transfer to our own dear Southern land. Now, she is involved in the heat and dust and blood of the battle: Hereafter, she shall repose in victory and triumph and peace. Now she sits as a widow, forsaken of the nations: Hereafter she shall arise, radiant as a queen, resplendent as the day, crowned with immortal honour, in favor with God and man. Now, she is oppressed, but not overwhelmed; enveloped in flames, but not consumed; in peril, but not appalled; putting her trust under the shadowing wings of the Almighty. Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning.

She is now toilfully learning those precious lessons which she shall teach hereafter to oppressed and struggling nations; and to the proud and heartless Tyrants, who in other lands and in future days, may seek to degrade the noble and enslave the free. She is now making for herself a name which shall be gratefully and admiringly murmured wherever freedom has a friend or the God of Providence a worshipper! The only proper view of this Revolution, is that which regards it as the child of Providence, who "maketh the wrath of man to praise Him and the remainder thereof He restrains." The ends contemplated by men and the actions permitted, not approved by God, are in many cases, very unlike his ultimate designs. And we may say to our Northern oppressors, as Joseph to his cruel brethren, As for you, ye thought evil against us, but God meant it unto good. Gen. 50: 20. All that was affirmed, and more than was imagined of the ulterior aims of those who inaugurated this atrocious war, has been already done or plainly indicated already.

Were we able to interpret aright the painful dispensations of the Almighty, we might find that our frightful series of reverses during the winter and spring, were as truly merciful in their intent as our recent splendid successes. It was a humiliating but needful part of our education as a people. It was a bitter medicine, but we hope it wrought a lasting cure. It taught us our prostrate dependence on Him who, sitting on the circle of the Heavens, hath appointed to the nations of the earth the bounds of their habitation and rules with absolute sway over the councils of Cabinets and the event of battles. It was the indispensable condition of the exercise of virtues, with-

out which no character is complete, whether of an individual or a whole people—virtues less obtrusive and less glaring than heroic prowess on the field of bloody strife, but not less magnanimous, less essential or less rare—the virtues of self-control, of patience, of fortitude and of hope. It has served to exhibit a striking characteristic of our people, previously unknown, it may be, to themselves. I mean their marvellous recuperative energy. In a week after a defeat or disaster, they have seemed as resolute, as hopeful, and as eager as ever. In the presence of terrible calamity, under the pressure of heavy affliction they exclaim,

> "All is not lost; the unconquerable will
> And resolution never to submit or yield,
> And what is more, not to be overcome."

Another quality conspicuously evinced in the progress of this contest has been the singular unselfishness of the great body of our troops, many of them belonging to the best families of our Southern country, born in affluence, nurtured in ease and honour; yet entering the ranks and serving with "proud submission"—with "dignified obedience," under men in every way inferior to themselves, but invested by lawful authority for a temporary purpose with the right and the place of command. The true history of this war will show that nobler instances of knightly courtesy, of generous valour and of chivalrous emprise, have not been found among the best and bravest of our officers, than among the men subject to their authority.

I have spoken thus far of the gallantry of our soldiers and the patriotism of our people, but assuredly not with the design of giving the supreme glory to them. They have been but instruments in the hand of a higher power; channels through which the Divine goodness has streamed forth upon us. For the singular preservation of the precious lives of our leaders and troops exposed beyond all former precedent; for the signal victories vouchsafed to our arms over an arrogant and exulting foe; for the patriotic unity which has animated all classes and both sexes; for the spirit of moderation, of firmness and of humanity which has marked the policy and conduct of our rulers, our fervent thanks are due to that benign Providence who alone bestowed and inspired it all. The glorious deliverances which we have so often experienced heretofore, so far from

exhausting the Divine bounty, may under an economy of grace, be turned into an argument for still greater mercies hereafter. When the stripling David armed only with a sling and pebbles from the brook, went forth to meet the giant of Gath, the thought of ancient deliverances kindled his courage. And David said, Moreover, the Lord that delivered me out of the paw of the lion and out of the paw of the bear, He will deliver me out of the hand of this Philistine.*

There ought to be not the spirit of carnal rejoicing and self-complacent boasting among us now, but great solemnity of heart and great tenderness of walk. We should humble ourselves even in the hour of victory, before the eternal Majesty of Heaven and earth, whose right hand and holy arm hath gotten Him the victory. If, by ingratitude and unbelief, we provoke Him to depart from us, our failure and ruin will not be more deserved than dreadful. The brilliant successes with which His favour has crowned our arms and gladdened our hearts, will be like a single star or a small cluster of stars in a firmament of gloom—a bright chapter in a volume written within and without in characters of mourning, lamentation and woe. This contest is not ended. Infuriated by defeat, our enemies are more ran corous and implacable than ever. They are summoning new levies of hundreds of thousands, to effect, if possible, the subjugation of our people, and will resort to every device which cruelty, sharpened by malice and mortification, can suggest to effect their purpose. In these circumstances we look to that God who delivered David and Israel, and while we celebrate His past goodness, hopefully invoke His future favour. Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we will remember the name of the Lord our God. Not unto us, not unto us, but unto thy name, give glory for thy mercy and for thy truth's sake. Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning. Abiding in such a posture of spirit as this, may we not hope that what He hath so auspiciously begun He will carry on to a glorious consummation? A conflict waged in self-defence for all that man holds dear, and consecrated by the martyr-blood of the best men in these Confederate States—by the solemn voice of all our religious convocations, of all Christian churches and above all

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* 1 Samuel; 17: 37:

by the visible favour of Almighty Power, cannot but terminate happily. We should learn, therefore, to exercise a cheerful trust in God and cherish perfect unity among ourselves.

And amid all the excitements of war, let us not cease to feel that a people's spiritual interests are their supreme interests; especially in a time of political convulsion, when so many moral and social bonds are relaxed or broken. He, therefore, who at this crisis does most for his own soul and the souls of others, does most for his country; and he who by his conduct or teaching lowers the standard of Gospel piety, is an enemy not only to religion but to liberty. There are times when extraordinary energies should be put forth by the servants of the Most High. Whenever men are profoundly agitated by a political convulsion or by a war, such as that which is now raging throughout our extensive borders, vice of all kinds abounds. Satan and his agents are active and vigilant. At such a time the people of God should evince a corresponding energy. Never were Christians called to more diligence, self-denial, courage, benevolence and industry than at this solemn juncture; and it is, at such a time as this, that God and all good men are most fruitfully active. In a contest like this every man must serve his country according to his several ability and in his appointed sphere. Every man must find the place and the duty suited to him, and to which he is suited. None can be more important than practical and prayerful labor for the religious welfare of our heroic soldiers; directly seeking their salvation by preaching to them—by writing and distributing Tracts and Hymns and Bibles—by praying for them—and by tender sympathy with them in the trials and temptations to which they must be inevitably exposed. If God should breathe over these Confederate States the spirit of devotion, of humility, of dependence and of faith, it would be better than any victory in the field, however brilliant—for it would be at once a proof of His favour and a pledge of our prosperity.

Instructed by the calamities of war, we shall estimate more highly the blessings of peace. We hardly ever value as we ought uninterrupted prosperity, or estimate as we should any good while it is ours. The evils of this trying period will not be lost to us, if they shall impress upon us all an adequate sense of the preciousness of peace and bring the policy of our Rulers and the temper of our peo-

ple into perfect harmony with the spirit of the Gospel, peace on earth, good will to men. Such have been the gallantry and patriotism of our troops in the field, and such the charity and courage of our women in anticipating and ministering to their wants, that we may pursue our chosen policy of peace with all nations without the imputation of effeminacy or cowardice. After the lapse of a few years, we trust that we shall look back upon these trying times as on a troubled dream, and in the secure enjoyment of peace repeat, with even more solemn and tender emphasis than on this day of thanksgiving and praise. Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning.

The martyred dead have taken possession of this Southern soil for the Southern people. It was theirs originally, by the gift of God, and they have bought it anew by their blood. This land will be endeared to us and to our posterity, because it is the earthly resting-place of our immortal dead. It was the boast of the ancient Greek, as his eye wandered over his beautiful and beloved land, that every hill bore the tomb of a hero or the temple of a God. But more noble dust mingled not with the soil of Attica than that which reposes in the bosom of our own dear native land. It surely lends attraction to heaven, viewed with reference to our present constitution, to think that there we shall behold and converse with the best and loviest we have known on earth. If Socrates could talk of transports of joy at the prospect of seeing Palamedes, Ajax and other heroes of antiquity in a future world—how should the Christian feel when he looks forward to an everlasting abode, not a transient meeting with the saints of all ages—with his Christian friends who have fallen in his defence—and with Christ Himself, the Author and Finisher of our faith. If he hoped for felicity in comparing his experience with theirs—how shall we rejoice in reviewing dispensations of Providence now impenetrably dark, or imperfectly understood, but then shining in the light of Heaven. The *past* and the *future* meet in the memory of the dead. The sweetest and brightest link in the chain that stretches back over the past, binds us to the dead; and that chain stretches forward to eternity and attaches itself to the Throne of the living God. Thus death joins on to life; and all that is sacred in memory connects itself with all that is inspiring in hope. Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning.